Reagan's Plan for MX Attracts Fire

Political expediency and technical miscalculation produce a dangerous plan for basing the MX in silos

In the spring of 1986, if the Reagan Administration gets its way, the U.S. Air Force will begin planting spanking new MX nuclear missiles in the Northern Plains. Between 40 and 50 MX's will be lowered into concrete-reinforced holes now housing smaller, less powerful nuclear missiles known as Minutemen. United State officials believe that, if the Soviets wanted to, they could destroy these valuable new weapons in a first strike. Thus, if any of the MX are to be fired, the United States will be the aggressor in a nuclear war and strike first, or it will fire when its computers say that a Soviet attack has just begun.

In Congress, at the Pentagon, and in the arms control community, there is broad agreement that the placement of MX missiles in vulnerable silos increases the chance that a tense international crisis could become a nuclear war. Either of the superpowers, relying on potentially erroneous warning signs or simply the expectation that attack from the other is imminent, would be tempted to hit first, to achieve the greatest advantage. As General Richard Ellis, former director of the Strategic Air Command, remarked in 1980, "The most destabilizing strategic situation that can be devised is one in which a major weapons system of a superpower could be destroyed in a surprise attack by another superpower."

This is not a new concern. For two decades, the Pentagon has been searching for a way to protect its missiles from enemy attack. In 1979, the search culminated in a proposal by the Carter Administration to build thousands of missile shelters in the southwestern United States, and to shuttle MX missiles from one shelter to another in a deliberate shell game. But last year the Reagan Administration rejected this scheme and decided to put some MX missiles in Minuteman silos. This decision has created precisely the situation that Ellis and others have warned about.

When the Soviet Union demonstrated in 1978 that it could fire huge long-range nuclear missiles with great accuracy, it was a nightmare come true for the United States. It meant that the Soviets possessed the means to threaten destruction of the U.S. land-based missiles in a preemptive attack.

The Air Force has worried about this problem for a long time, searching high and low for a better place to put both the existing, silo-based missiles and a new missile, the MX. The search has ended, under the Reagan Administration, back where it began, with a short-term plan to put more missiles into silos.

The first article in this series examined the major reasons that U.S. officials became concerned about missile vulnerability. This article examines the Reagan Administration's response to this concern, a response that is coming under increasing congressional attack. Subsequent articles will explore three potential long-term answers to missile vulnerability.

Fortunately, it will not be permanent. When Reagan made his decision, he also proposed study of three likely replacements for silo basing: a missile defense, missiles on constantly roving airplanes, and missiles buried deep underground. But none of these could be in operation before 1990, and so the risky situation will prevail for at least 4 years. Reagan need only turn to Paul Nitze, his chief negotiator in the arms control talks in Europe, for an assessment of the danger. "Deployment of a larger missile in the Minuteman silos does nothing to solve the silo vulnerability problem and in addition has the negative feature of a threatening but vulnerable U.S. first-strike counterforce capability," Nitze said in 1979, during hearings on SALT II. "Accordingly, it would increase crisis instability and the prospect that deterrence would fail."

The seeds of this predicament lie in the Reagan Administration's decision that the MX must be added immediately to the U.S. nuclear stockpile, despite the lack of a long-term basing mode—a decision that apparently owes more to political expediency than to strategic study. During the Administration's deliberations, the need for rapid MX deployment was articulated by Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who was in turn influenced by the conclusions of a special MX advisory panel that he established.*

The panel, headed by University of California physicist Charles Townes, had examined literally dozens of ideas for basing the MX, including the Carter plan to hide 200 missiles among 4600 missile shelters erected in the southwestern U.S. desert. It heard from the Navy, the Air Force, the State Department, members of the academic community, a handful of defense contractors, and some state and federal legislators. It came to the awkward conclusion that virtually every idea was flawed, because the Soviets could build warheads of sufficient power and in sufficient quantity to destroy almost any land-based target. "It is not a very difficult problem, and does not require any great expense or any different technology from what the Soviets have now," Townes explains. The panelists unanimously agreed that two ideas showed particular promise: missiles aboard airplanes and missiles buried deep underground.

Because both required further study, a short-term solution was discussed. Townes and several other panelists simply favored expansion of the bomber and submarine-based missile force. "The simple answer to the problem of [land-based missile] vulnerability is to beef up the other two legs of the strategic triad and rely on them," says Townes. But a majority of the panelists thought that

*The panel members were Worth Bagley, a retired admiral and former vice chief of naval operations; Solomon Buchsbaum, vice president of Bell Laboratories and former chairman of the Defense Science Board; Andrew Goodpaster, a retired general and former commander of Allied forces in Europe; William Nierenberg, director of the Scripps Institute of Oceanography and chairman of the JASON defense advisory group; David Packard, board chairman of Hewlett-Packard and a former deputy secretary of defense; Henry Rowen, professor of business at Stanford and former president of the RAND Corporation; Bernard Schriever, a retired general and former director of the ICBM program; Brent Scowcroft, a retired lieutenant general and former national security adviser to President Ford; Charles Townes, a Nobel laureate for his contributions to the laser; Albert Wheelon, a vice president of the Hughes Aircraft Corporation and former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency; and James Woolsey, a Washington attorney and former Navy under secretary.